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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001749

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR  
ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM PTER LE SY FR

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SAAD HARIRI UNHAPPY WITH THE FRENCH AND  
WITH MARCH 14 ALLIES

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (S) Saad Hariri -- billionaire, Parliamentary majority leader, and prime minister-in-waiting -- is annoyed. In a 11/7 meeting with the Ambassador, Hariri claimed to have been betrayed by the French. Whereas he had carefully worked out an option for selecting presidential candidates that would keep March 14 front and center, the Syrians had "charmed" the French into changing the mechanism into a Patriarch-focused approach that will, at best, create a weak president susceptible to Syrian pressure. Hariri expressed equal disgust with his own allies, claiming that their extremist views regarding presidential elections put Lebanon at risk. A "half-plus-one" election would be seen as an "act of war" against the Shia population. Someone like Robert Ghanem or Joseph Torbey is the only solution to the presidential deadlock, in his view. Hariri also complained about the monthly Maronite Bishops' statement, arguing that the bishops had made it appear as though the March 14 and March 8 political camps had equally valid positions. End summary.

THE FRENCH WERE "CHARMED" BY BASHAR,  
IN WAYS THAT DISTORTED THEIR THINKING

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¶2. (S) The Ambassador met one-on-one with a grumpy MP Saad Hariri on 11/7, a few hours after Hariri had returned to Beirut. Hariri launched into a profanity-peppered diatribe against the current incarnation of the French proposal to solve Lebanon's presidential elections. When he was in Paris, Hariri said that he had carefully worked out a mechanism with Elysee advisors Claude Gueant and Jean-David Levitte: March 14 leaders would draw up a list of five presidential candidates. The list would be quietly vetted with Maronite Patriarch Sfeir and adjusted as needed. Then, that list would be given to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, who could pick any candidate of the five, who would then be elected president. If Berri rejected all five names, then the five names would be submitted to the parliament. Writing their script with Hariri, Levitte and Gueant agreed to tell Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that this was the formula he had no choice but to accept, if he hoped to restore

French-Syrian bilateral relations. This way, the president elected would be acceptable to March 14 and recognize that his election depended primarily on being placed on the March 14-created list of candidates. But Syria would be protected, as Berri would choose the winner.

¶3. (S) However, Hariri continued, when Levitte and Gueant met Asad in Damascus on 11/4, "Bashar charmed them." Bashar manipulated them into approving a much-altered mechanism by which the French, their thinking distorted, will pressure the Patriarch into giving five names. The Patriarch's list will be presented to Saad Hariri and Nabih Berri, who will together select the one to take to parliament for pro-forma consensus elections. In Hariri's view, this is a bad approach. The Patriarch does not want to give names, and now the French pressure will be concentrated on him, not to the Syrians. If he doesn't produce names, he will be the spoiler, not Damascus.

¶4. (S) Moreover, Bashar knows that Sfeir, fearful of violence, will scrupulously avoid any name seen as the least bit controversial, meaning no one associated with March 14 will be included in any list he produces. Without question, Sfeir will have at least one weak name on his list that Berri would eagerly grab. And there is no "safety net" for March 14: if Hariri rejects all five names, then March 14 will be blamed for the crisis. Bashar, in Hariri's view, cleverly shifted responsibility onto the French for producing a president who will ultimately be satisfactory to Syria but not necessarily to March 14.

#### IMPROVING ON THE FRENCH PROPOSAL

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¶5. (S) The Ambassador asked whether there was a way to take the French mechanism and improve upon it. Hariri said that two changes would make the proposal acceptable. First, the

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Patriarch should include three primary candidates (Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, and Michel Aoun), leaving only two spots for others. Second, if Hariri and Berri could not agree on consensus choice from the list, then the entire list should be submitted to parliament. This would protect March 14 interests, as the March 14 majority could elect either Lahoud or Harb. But how, he asked, can France now force Syria to accept such changes? The Ambassador asked about whether March 14 leaders could quietly work with the Patriarch on his list, so that the Patriarch -- if he ever succumbs to the French pressure and makes a list -- submits credible names from the start. Good idea, Hariri responded, but the Patriarch won't agree. "He doesn't like us," Hariri concluded.

#### MARCH 14 ALLIES MISTAKEN, "CRAZY" IN THINKING OF HALF-PLUS-ONE ELECTION

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¶6. (S) Hariri then launched into an attack on his own allies, focusing in particular on the March 14 presidential candidates (Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb), Walid Jumblatt, and Samir Geagea. They are "crazy" in advocating a "half-plus-one" absolute majority election, he said. Even as a tactical, rhetorical gesture only, it makes it appear as though March 14 is ready to launch war against the Shia. Hizballah is being candid in making sure everyone recognizes that "half-plus-one" elections would be interpreted as an "act of war." The Ambassador noted that the French accept, albeit reluctantly, an absolute majority election as a fall-back option to vacuum, should there be no president elected by the end of Emile Lahoud's term.

¶7. (S) Shaking his head, Hariri said that he opposes using an absolute majority election at any time, "now or in the future." The Ambassador asked what that means for presidential elections. Someone like MP Robert Ghanem or

Maronite League chief Joseph Torbey would be acceptable, Hariri said. As for Sheikh Michel Khoury (a name circulating with increasing frequency as a potential compromise candidate in March 14 circles), Berri rejects him. The Ambassador noted that this is the problem: Berri, looking over his shoulders at Damascus, will veto any candidate deemed credible by March 14, even if the candidate (like Sheikh Michel) was never a formal part of the March 14 movement. "What can I do," Hariri asked, "kick the Shia out of the country? Start war with Syria?"

¶8. (S) Hariri also blasted the monthly statement of the Maronite Bishops, issued a few hours earlier. In Hariri's analysis, the bishops refused to acknowledge that there is an inherent difference between March 14 and March 8 political blocs. March 14 is fighting for Lebanon's independence and sovereignty; March 8 is answering to Syria and Iran. Yet the bishops blamed both sides equally for the deadlock over presidential elections.

COMMENT

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¶9. (S) While we share Hariri's stated dismay over the current French proposal for solving the presidential deadlock, we have a nagging suspicion that he was more deeply involved in its evolution than he is letting on. Knowing that his allies hate the concept (of the French pressuring the Patriarch into providing what will surely be an uninspired list), Hariri may be overdramatizing in order to appear free of complicity. After all, there seems to be considerable overlap between the thinking of Hariri, the Patriarch, Nabih Berri, and the French (and the Saudis, for that matter): avoid a half-plus-one scenario at almost any cost. There may even be overlap on some of the names of candidates -- both Hariri and Patriarch Sfeir have mentioned Maronite League chief Joseph Torbey to us.

¶10. (S) The trouble for Hariri is that his March 14 allies ascribe more importance to getting the presidency right than he does, given his focus on the premiership that follows presidential elections. While Hariri may be prepared to accept Torbey (and have the Patriarch's blessing for doing so), as late as last night, Walid Jumblatt complained that, except for strong candidates like Charles Rizk and Michel

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Khoury, all the other potential fall-back choices equal defeat for March 14. He dismissed Torbey as a non-entity. We shared with Jumblatt the proposal that March 14 try to float names with the Patriarch, with the Patriarch selecting from a March 14 list in satisfying the French demand that he give five candidates. Jumblatt said that he was willing to try that approach, but he expressed skepticism that the Patriarch, given the 11/7 bishops' statement, was in any mood to promote candidates acceptable to March 14. The Ambassador sees the Patriarch on 11/8 and will discuss this option.

FELTMAN